

# MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society

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## REPORT

Report 14

May, 1977

### FOCUS ON MEDIA

There are two basic messages we receive from our television sets: 1) Violence is the great adventure and the sure solution and 2) over-consumption is the way to the good life.

We are all aware of North America's fascination with violence--we have heard the statistics and read the results of studies linking TV violence and human behavior.

But focusing on physical violence may be a good way to blind ourselves to the deeper issue. Surely a greater violence is that our media--TV, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines--are shaping our attitudes and our values. The media are no longer reflections of society; they are creators.

Nancy Millar, in the April 1976 United Church Observer, muses that a revision of the Ten Commandments has sort of washed over us as we sat. "Gradually we learned that covetousness was good since it improved health, happiness and the Gross National Product. Murder was okay in the pursuit of justice. Stealing and the use of the Lord's name were necessary for plot development and social significance. And as for Sunday, the Sabbath, it turned out to be the best day to show the Grey Cup game."

What do we see on TV? Some facts: One third of all people on TV are involved in law enforcement and are violent in 77 percent of their appearances (1969 statistics). Less than 10 percent of people are working class, and these are often portrayed negatively. White American males are less likely to be punished for aggression than other characters.

Only one quarter of TV characters are women. Two thirds of these are married or have been married, while most men are unmarried. Most women in crime dramas are victims.

The soap opera is the most insidious reflection of our culture portrayed in the media. A great way to undermine a woman's growth is to feed her a daily diet of infantile fantasies, shoddy values and nauseating bathos. "Soap operas," says Anne D'Arcy in Engage/Social Action, "invade housewives' minds brutally and early in life by violence to family commitment . . . The soap operas gnaw away fluidly at the rock of every fundamental notion of trust within family life. Soap opera housewives live in a world of paper throwaway husbands, brutalized children, disposable lovers and marriages."

"All television is educational," someone has said. The advertisers who spend billions of dollars per year know this is true. (One woman in California is

suing a major network claiming that her daughter was raped as a result of a specific program.) "The church supposedly teaches the worth of the individual, the importance of rational responsible choice, the necessity of intellectual and moral self-discipline," says Nancy Millar. "TV teaches us to do what everybody else is doing--and then to go the friendly bank when the bills roll in." We all know who is winning.

Stewart Hoover, media consultant for Church of the Brethren, is concerned with even broader implications of our mass media. Not only are our most basic values being shaped by the media, but our ability to understand the world and its problems is being seriously stifled by our limited access to information. TV news shows are merely "glorified headline services" which cannot begin to examine the complexities of national and international events. Newspapers are fast becoming sensationalized gossip columns with little in-depth analysis (witness the recent Margaret Trudeau craze). We are being stunted in our ability to participate rationally and meaningfully in a democracy.

Hoover is also concerned about the influence of western media abroad. The rapid promotion of over-consumption and materialism is effectively infiltrating every corner of the globe.

TV, in particular, claims to give people what they want--it depends on ratings, after all. The government, the schools (the church?) also, apparently, exist for people's wishes. It seems that our values are to be determined by popular vote, by the lowest common denominator. Is there no alternative? I am pessimistic.

--Margaret Loewen Reimer

*Margaret, a Task Force member and an editor for the Mennonite Reporter, took primary responsibility for collecting material for this issue.*

## QUIET VIOLENCE

*How are sexual stereotyping and pornography related to violence? The following excerpts from a study done by a task force of the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference in 1976 begin to explore the not-so-fragile web of "quiet" violence, sexuality and the media. Chairman of the Task Force on Violence in the Mass Media and Pornography was David Brunner.*

### A Definition of Violence

The problem of violence is not only the problem of muggings and shootings, but also the problem of a whole social structure which deceives, oppresses, stifles and fails to encourage people to fulfill their maximum potential.

Our English word violence comes from the Latin root "violare" which means "to violate." Violence, therefore, is that which violates persons before God. Violence for the Christian must minimally include physical violence, economic violence, psychological and structural violence.

Structural violence is that violence which occurs when systems, social structures or organizational structures violate the dignity of people by the effects of the way they operate. Violence to one's personhood, when it is of a serious nature, leaves one feeling helpless, impotent and totally frustrated. This is because the cause or root of the frustration is nearly impossible to pinpoint and because no one person is responsible for the situation, nor can one likely do anything about it.

To quote Robert Merton: "When oppressive power is thoroughly well established it does not always need to resort openly to violence because its laws are powerful enough. In other words, when a system can resort to overt force, compel people to live in conditions of abjection, helplessness and wretchedness that keep them

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on the level of beasts rather than men, then it is plainly violent." We tend to tolerate, perhaps even encourage, this quiet violence in an attempt to preserve order and prevent noisy violence.

For example, our school textbooks have grossly misrepresented the native people of North America as barbarians who "massacred" white man but were nobly defeated in battle. They are depicted as a race of lazy shiftless, drunken people. This is a systemic, all-encompassing violation of a whole people by historians, writers, publishers, school boards and teachers.

Jesus expands our definition of violence when he refused to distinguish between external behavior and internal attitudes (Matthew 5:27-28, for example, where he states that adultery can exist in the heart).

The basic assumption in society is that violence is either normal or necessary. This is evident in psychological, cultural and political theories. Normal violence is seen as either crisis (putting down violence with greater violence) or catharsis (necessary to achieve one's goals, redeeming as in revolution).

That violence is a reality in the society in which we live cannot be denied. Violence has been portrayed in the world's literature in all centuries and in all cultures. It is important then to distinguish between the portrayal of violence as an integral part of a story and the portrayal of violence simply for violence's sake. In good literature violence is characterized as a tragedy or calamity. Violence and death are depicted movingly. In mass media stories, however, violence is part of everyday living. Violence is shown to be the normal way of handling conflicts and arguments or for getting one's way (that is, through compulsion, fighting, even murder).

### Effects of Violence in Mass Media

The effects of portrayed violence through the mass media tend to desensitize people to real violence if they do not stay alert to the difference between real violence and entertainment violence. For example, the media uncovered the real violence involved in the Vietnam war. Night after night people heard and saw the horror of the Vietnamese people in the burned-out villages, the utter destruction and death; and their hearts were stirred to speak out against such wars and atrocities.

Why is violence so much a part of "entertainment" viewing? It seems clear that frequent viewing of police and crime shows is a factor in building up unresolved anxieties. The sadism, irrational crime, brutality, sexual promiscuity and mental health problems portrayed on TV suggest to some people valid forms of behavior to be copied.

Some would suggest that portrayed violence has therapeutic value. That is, the viewer will have his aggressive feelings drained off as he views a violent show so he does not have to resort to violent acts himself. However, watching violence leaves many people anxious and apprehensive. People who habitually watch crime and police stories may be fearful and insist on strong law enforcement and police protection. Many women living alone are very cautious and fearful since rape is a much-used theme for police and crime shows.

Another form of violence, more subtle but just as real, is the housewife's attitude toward her lot in life and the daily household chores she must do. To many, those chores are sheer boredom and drudgery. Day after day they watch soap operas and read "true confessions" magazines and Harlequin romances. Their minds are being fed the fantasy and unreal happiness that says they must have beautiful homes, many things, beautiful children and adoring husbands in order to be happy.

Many programs deal with human relationships, human problems and human conflict. Are they presented with reality and good taste, or exploitation and pointless diversion? Programs need not be obscene to exploit the dignity of a human being. One needs to look beyond the created delusions of violence and ask what is being said about human life. The audience becomes slaves to the media if the program arouses emotions and evokes sympathy but fails to probe the underlying causes and motivations of the violent act. Political unrest of our native peoples may be violence but by not probing the underlying motivations of the action, we fail to uncover injustice and inequality. Similarly, a successful television serial called "The Waltons" is considered by many as a fairly wholesome program. Yet this family solves every problem happily. Mom and Dad have a model marriage, are usually accessible, the source of all wisdom and knowledge and always at home. Is this reality in the 20th century?

When analyzing the media we must ask:

- 1) Does the focus of this presentation aid in the transformation of people into strong, coping, actualized persons?
- 2) Does it contribute to man's becoming fully man growing toward his potential?\*

#### How to Respond

First, one can respond by writing or telephoning the broadcaster (producer, director, writer). Contact the local station. Be sure to speak to the person who is responsible, not his secretary or assistant. Be specific about what you don't want. Be sure to respond only to programs to which you will listen or watch. Having done your homework before making the call, you can be confident in your exchange.

\*re: "man's becoming fully man growing toward his potential." What should an editor do? Any comments for the June-July issue on women and language?

When you write a letter, address it to the name of the person you want to contact. Include in the address the title of the broadcaster and the program title. State which program you are concerned about, whether you saw all or part of it, whether you approve or disapprove and why. Ask politely for a reply. When you receive a satisfactory reply, send a letter of thanks. If not, press again for an answer.

If you feel strongly about an issue, also contact the advertiser. Inform him that you will not be one of his customers as long as his dollars support programs which are offensive. Be specific in your criticism and persist.

Second, form or become part of a media group that is concerned with affecting media content. This group may involve media personnel, write briefs and become a media resource for the community.

Third, existing groups in the church can write briefs to a commission, invite media personnel to speak at meetings and learn to understand the media and its problems.

All cable systems must provide a community channel. The air time is available to any organization or person who wishes to present acceptable content.

A technique which is useful in helping children to understand the difference between reality and "staged" acts is to tour a TV studio to see how filming is done.

The church needs to "send" people into mass communications by encouraging young people to enter this field and to use their energy to improve mass media. We need to cultivate our talents to use the airwaves as another medium for proclaiming the good news.

#### Pornography

It is important that we know what we are dealing with in pornography. Is any verbal

or pictorial portrayal of human sexual activity or sexual parts to be classified as pornography? That would include some of the world's finest literature, including some biblical passages. At the other extreme, some would advocate completely free expression of any and all forms of sexuality, making it available to any and all persons with no restriction whatsoever! Perhaps the simplest definition we can offer is that pornography is the depiction of human sexuality solely to stimulate, excite, or titillate persons, or manipulate them into some form of degrading behavior.

Pornography is seen as a form of violence in that it violates persons. It takes one of the most beautiful and sublime of human experiences--sexuality in love--extracts it from the loving relationship and makes it a matter of selfish enjoyment. In pornography sex is individualistic, selfish, manipulative. More and more pornographic sex includes sado-masochism, which by definition involves physical violence and pleasure through pain.

Let us propose a more positive approach to dealing with pornography; namely to create healthier attitudes in ourselves and our children toward sexuality. The market for pornography lies primarily among those who have negative or unwholesome attitudes toward themselves. Therefore it is logical that we should make a greater effort at family life education, including sex education aimed at all age groups.

The best approach to dealing with violence and pornography is not an attack (though that may be called for on occasion), but rather a positive creative replacement. We must stress participation rather than spectatorship. Let us do things together, learn to know each other again, encourage the development of persons.

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## FLIGHT INTO FANTASY: DAY-TIME TV

*What happens to women at home, young children and the elderly who daily slip into the vicarious world of television?*

*Glennis Yantzi, a Kitchener, Ontario homemaker, watched day-time television for a week keeping an eye out for factors which shape women's values and views of themselves. Following are her observations:*

I found it hard not to chuckle when I was asked if I would do some concentrated TV watching for one week to see what really is being shown on TV. Me? Watch TV for a whole week? But I never watch TV. We don't even own one. I've always had the reputation of not being able to sit still long enough to watch a program to the end or falling asleep in the middle of a movie.

But I was convinced I should put myself to the task, and so I approached my good friend who said, sure, I could borrow his TV.

My greatest astonishment was at the amount of time given to game shows. Approximately one half of viewing time during the day is taken with this type of thing. Past work experiences have shown me how much this type of program appeals to older people in particular. There seems to be a certain "TV mentality" present in the devoted viewers who also actively participate. People phoning in with answers or participating, as in charades, seem to experience a wide range of emotions, as a result of the suspense and anticipation. Game shows seem to give an image of a life full of suspense and sensationalism, a contrast to the routine life of the viewer--the senior citizen or the housewife at home with her preschooler. Background music, the audience clapping, and bell tones announcing time up are all manipulative and contribute to this aura of sensationalism. We all have our fantasy, but how much can we indulge in and remain healthy?

I also feel the giving away, continuously, of expensive prizes is a contributing factor to the growing mania of instant success. Somehow viewers must get the feeling that life is a big gamble. Some of us are lucky, others aren't. There's no feeling of responsibility involved.

The afternoon soap opera hours seem to be another potential for flight into fantasy. The recurring themes are marriage breakdowns and general deterioration of family relationships and communication. Someone else's husband always seems more understanding, etc., etc. I suggest that soap operas serve as an outlet for repressed feelings of boredom within a marriage as idealized by our society.

Another favorite seems to be an obsession with health, or lack of it. Breast cancer seems to be a favorite. I suppose such an emphasis has some potential for public awareness, but at what point does it contribute to neurosis?

The commercials seem to contribute largely to the instant success syndrome mentioned earlier. Mrs. X., convincing her audience they should be using the latest, newest floor wax, is white, middle class, properly groomed and manicured, living in a comfortable middle class home. Her image implies success. Instant success! No concept of an ongoing life with its frustrations and resolutions. I feel there have been some attempts made at changing this white middle class stereotyping, but this image still predominates.

Food commercials capitalize on instant 20th century products. Instant rice magically appears, piping hot, on the table. Duncan Hines cake mixes and Pepperidge Farm guarantee instant success again. Shreddies are crisp and crunchy. Are they nutritious? Who cares? As long as they are crisp and crunchy.

"Doesn't your baby deserve Pamper dryness?" is one example of a guilt producing commercial. Your child deserves the best, especially in diapers. One can't help but question the priority values here.

Society's male and female stereotyping still predominates. In one commercial high school girls are encouraged to develop sex appeal to impress their male teacher. Camay facial soap gives instant sex appeal. I get the feeling that the key to success is to smell right, smile right and spray right.

There are some children's programs being shown, however, which are of quite good quality. Sesame Street is one. It does a fairly good job of integrating different ethnic and cultural groups and breaking down stereotypes. Many of the settings are inner city apartment complexes, acquainting the child with stark realities of life.

My only concern about one program that gets such wide viewing by such a specific segment of society is that it could be producing a mass culture, a group completely homogenous in its thought processes. Another concern is whether the public education system can maintain this high quality of teaching. Are children bored by the classroom setting, having had a diet of continuous excitement? Also, how can any form of traditional "religious education", i.e. Sunday School, compete with this?

Another pleasant surprise was the lack of overt violence on daytime viewing--Cartoon Capers, shown during the lunch hour, geared toward a children's audience, was one of the few programs exhibiting violence. And that was so ridiculous that the average child would be able to separate it from reality and would likely be unaffected by it.

Canada A.M. is an informative program--interviewing people in the news or giving information of interest to the general public. However, it appears at 8-9 a.m. and how many people are free to watch TV at that time of the day?

The religious meditations vary greatly in quality. Usually they are brief and to the point. Regardless of the quality, they are a rather welcome pause from the blaring commercialism which predominates the rest of the time.

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## RELATED RESOURCES

### LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON IMPROVING PROGRAMMING:

#### Action for Children's Television (ACT)

- Established in 1968 by a group of parents, teachers and physicians.
- Besides opposing violence, ACT is concerned with racial and sexual stereotyping and the quality and quantity of advertising directed toward children.
- 46 Austin St., Newtonville, Mass. 02160

#### Help America Reduce Televiolence (HART)

- Established 1975 by minister of Church of the Brethren.
- Box 1701, South Bend, Ind. 46624

#### National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting

- Goal is to make media more responsive to public interest.
- Have recently begun a listing of TV programs and sponsors having the most and least violence and releasing the list to the press.
- 1028 Connecticut Ave., N.W. #402, Washington, D.C.

#### American Council for Better Broadcasts and Morality in Media, Inc.

- First is to improve quality of radio and TV by educational means.
- Second group concerned with pornography and excessive violence.
- ACBB: 120 East Wilson, Madison, Wis. 53703
- Morality in Media: 487 Park Avenue, N.Y. 10022

#### Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission

- Government agency.
- Communications can be sent to Berger Bldg., 100 Metcalfe St., Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N2.
- Executive director: J.M. Shoemaker.

#### Canadian Broadcasting League

- Box 1504, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5R5

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## NEWS

A group from last year's inter-Mennonite Women in Ministry Conference in Lombard, Illinois, is tentatively planning a second conference near Denver for June 16-19. Tentative goals include:

- 1) To provide a time of support for women and men in various forms of ministry and to encourage more women to take leadership roles in ministry.
- 2) To encourage men in leadership positions of the church to look at models and possibilities for using more women in various forms of ministry.
- 3) To better understand Christian feminism from a biblical perspective.
- 4) To confront all of us with the Spirit's giving of gifts and to become aware of various types and forms of ministries where these gifts are needed.
- 5) To stimulate thinking/action regarding male-female team ministry possibilities.
- 6) To take a look at where we are now as women and men in the Mennonite Church and to develop strategies and models that will help us support and encourage each other in the future.

For more information contact Marilyn Miller, co-pastor of the Arvada Mennonite Church, 5987 Miller St., Arvada, CO 80004.

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Rosemary Reuther proposes permanent part-time work as one means of dealing systematically with some of the possibilities and contradictions posed by women's demands for equal job opportunities in "Working Women and the Male Workday," Christianity and Crisis, February 7, 1977. See February 21 issue for responses by Sydney Thomson and James W. Kuhn.

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Mennonite Broadcasts has shifted the Heart to Heart radio program for women (homemakers) to a personal growth program for women, called Your Time. Program content now emphasized the individual and her personal growth in relationship to herself, and the total community--family, profession, peers, church.

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A March review of action taken on the concerns raised by a special advisory committee on women in Mennonite Central Committee the previous year indicates movement toward more women in field program administration, increasing use of hired help to ease heavy hosting responsibilities left to women in addition to their regular full-time assignments, steps to provide better pastoral care services, publication of a monograph on women in development and plans for leadership training seminars for both men and women.

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The New TransCentury Foundation of Washington, DC announces the formation of its Secretariat for Women in Development, as part of a grant from the Agency for International Development's Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation.

The Secretariat's mandate is to assist private and voluntary agencies improve the impact of their programming on Third World Women. It expects to offer the following services: 1) A directory of agency programming which will categorize PVO projects and programs affecting women; 2) Preparation of an annotated bibliography on the role of women in socioeconomic development, emphasizing collection of documents of direct relevance to private agency programming; 3) Establishment of a publication retrieval system for materials on women in development, for use by private and voluntary agencies; 4) Development of case studies and special studies on the role of women in development; 5) Organization of workshops and seminars for voluntary agencies on ways to more effectively integrate women in project programming.

Secretariat clients are also eligible for assistance from the New TransCentury Foundation, under other parts of the AID grant. Services offered include management and technical assistance on personnel, recruitment, budgeting and control; management information systems; program planning and evaluation; training; project management; and broader issues of organization, structure, goal setting and strategic planning.

For further information, contact Mary Ann Riegelman, Director, Secretariat for Women in Development, New TransCentury Foundation, 1789 Columbia Road, N.W., Washington, DC 20009; telephone: (202) 462-6661.

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The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, Editor, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

Send address changes to Peace Section, MCC, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA 17501.

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